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ABSTRACT

Telephone surveys of 844 residents in 42 rural Pennsylvania counties established baseline data on rural opinions about 14 public policy issues. Concerning government spending, respondents felt that too little was spent on job creation, aging issues, child care, education, health services, and farming and agriculture; funding was about right for parks and recreation, historic preservation, and public transportation; and too much was spent on welfare services. Respondents showed a moderate to high level of trust and confidence in major governmental institutions, including schools, but only 37 percent had confidence in Congress. The four most important policy areas to rural residents were education, public safety, jobs/economic development, and health services, as indicated by a rating of 10 on a scale of 1 to 10. Property taxes rated 9, followed by roads, environment, state taxes, and farm issues at 8. Issues in which performance did not measure up to importance included jobs and economic development, property taxes, health services, education, public safety, state taxes, zoning, environment, transportation, farm issues, welfare, and parks and recreation. Attitudes about local governmental cooperation were split. Support was strong for local control of "sprawl," but not as strong for state control. A majority of respondents saw their community as a good place to live and supported their local business community. Problems with health care were related more to cost than availability. (TD)

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THE CENTER FOR

Rural Pennsylvania

A Legislative Agency of the Pennsylvania General Assembly

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An Attitudinal Survey of Pennsylvania's Rural Residents

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
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RC 022879

Summary

In September 1998, the Center for Rural Pennsylvania contracted with Penn State Harrisburg's Center for Survey Research (CSR) to conduct a statewide attitudinal survey of rural Pennsylvanians. The Center sponsored the survey to compile baseline data on rural opinions and attitudes across a spectrum of policy relevant issues that either had been or were quickly becoming a part of Pennsylvania's public policy agenda. No statewide baseline data had previously existed on the rural Pennsylvania population with respect to its opinions and attitudes on a variety of issues.

The survey was conducted and results were compiled throughout 1999 and 2000. Selected highlights of the survey results follow and a complete list of topics addressed in the survey is on page 5.

Government Spending

Survey respondents believe government is spending "too little" in the following six policy areas: job creation (65 percent); aging issues (62 percent); child care (60 percent); education (59 percent); health services (57 percent); and farming and agriculture (50 percent).

Respondents judged government spending as "just right" in three policy areas, including parks and recreation (61 percent), historic preservation (57 percent), and public transportation (48 percent).

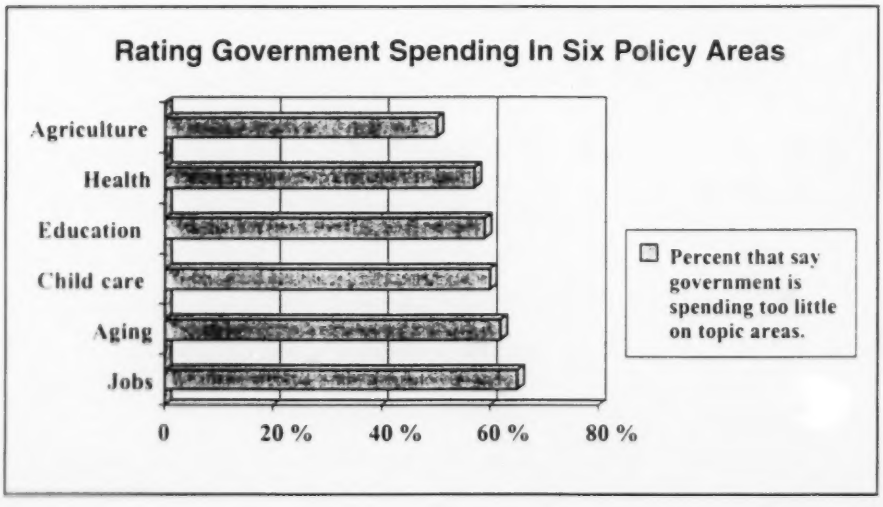
Government spending was judged as "too much" in only one policy area, welfare spending (43 percent).

Population Stability and Outmigration

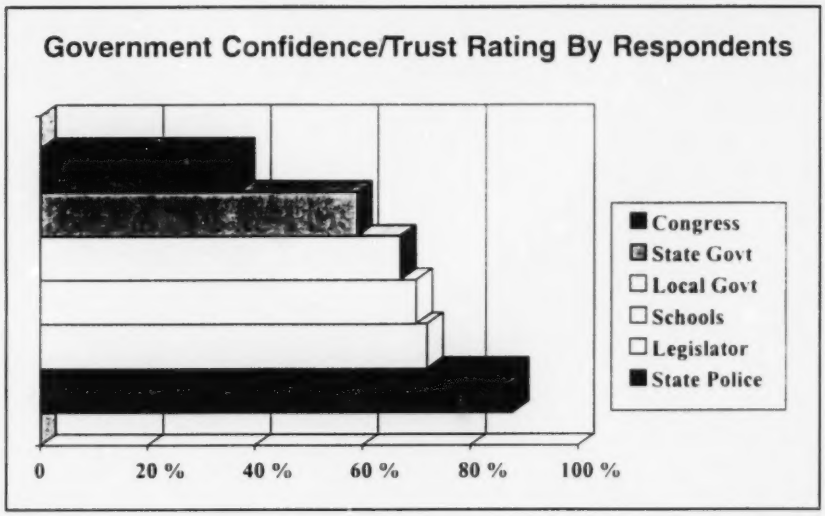
Rural Pennsylvania may experience a significant outmigration of retirees after the next 10 years. About 29 percent of rural Pennsylvanians plan to move when they retire and 11 percent don't know if they will move. Of those who plan to move, 53 percent say their move will take them out of Pennsylvania and only 9 percent don't know if it will or not. Thirty-seven percent of movers expect to relocate in Pennsylvania when they retire. If these plans were realized, rural Pennsylvania would lose about 25 percent of its retired population. The loss would be gradual, however, since about 3 out of 4 people will not retire for more than 10 years.

Confidence and Trust in Government Institutions

In general, rural Pennsylvanians show a moderate to high level of trust and confidence in major governmental institutions, and hold generally positive views of these institutions. There is nothing in the data to suggest that rural Pennsylvanians are particularly alienated or angry with government. One measure of this is the "favorable scores" given to local and state government, the state legislature, police and others. The favorable scores range from highs for state police at 88 percent, local police at 74 percent, local legislators at 72 percent and local schools at 70 percent – to lows for Congress at 37 percent, and state government agencies at 59 percent.



Measuring State Government Performance



Most important policy areas

The four most important policy areas to rural Pennsylvanians are education, public safety, jobs/economic development, and health services. All four rated a 10 on an importance scale of 1 to 10.

A fifth policy area, property taxes, rated 9 on the importance scale. Below these top tier issues are the environment, roads, state taxes, farm issues, and farmland preservation, which rated 8; and zoning/planning, recreation and parks, and welfare, which all rated 7. The lowest importance ratings were given to tourism, historic preservation, and Internet access.

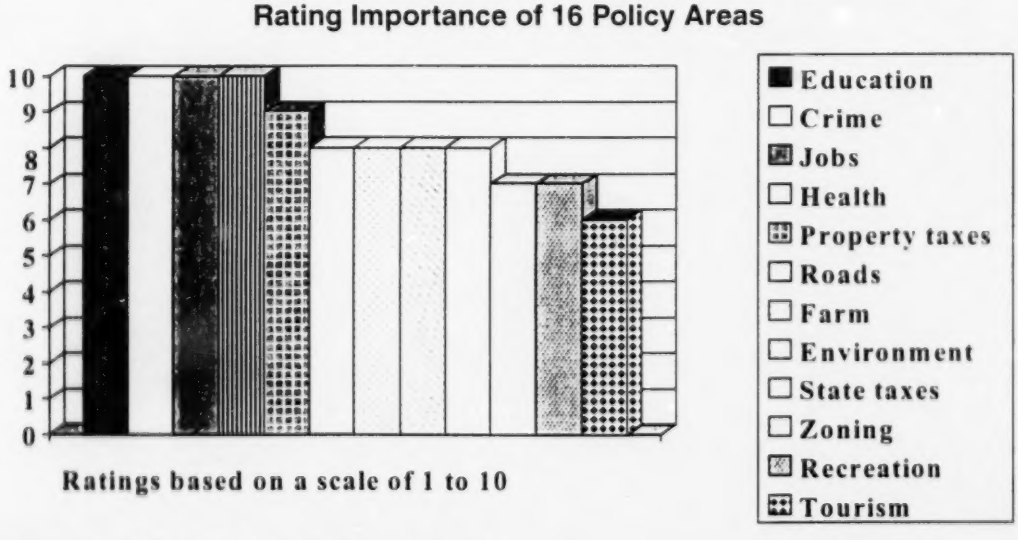
Rating job performance

Overall, state government received a medium to medium-low job rating across 16 policy areas from rural Pennsylvanians. Ratings allowed for both an absolute and a relative measure of job performance. With respect to an absolute measure, state government ratings on a 1 to 10 point scale ranged from a high of 7 to a low of 5, with a mean rating of 6 across all areas. Overall it would be accurate to label this a medium to medium-low performance rating.

The highest rating of 7 for job performances went to education, crime, tourism, and Internet access. The lowest performance ratings of 5 went to state taxes, property taxes, jobs /economic development, zoning/ planning and welfare.

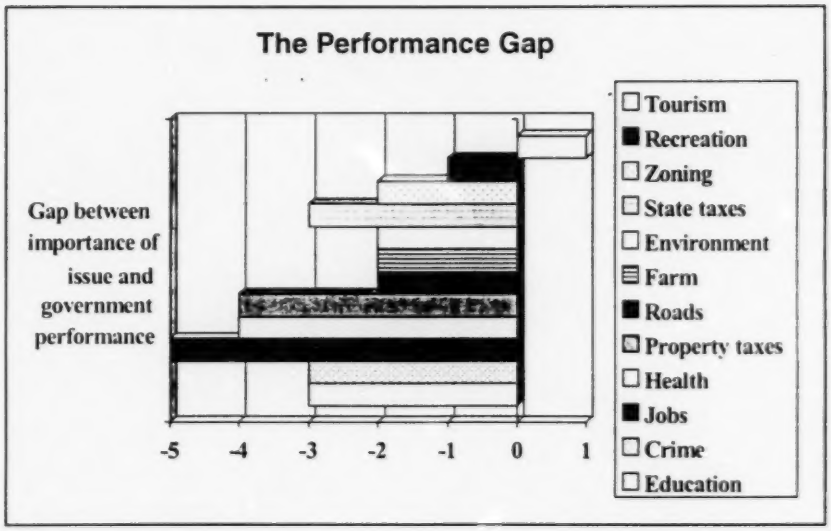
The performance gap

The study results allowed the researchers to measure and quantify a "performance gap" between the importance people attach to a policy area or problem and the job performance rating they gave to state government in that area.



An example of how a performance gap rating was assigned follows: A policy area rated 7 in importance and 7 in job performance would be labeled "par performance". A policy area rated 7 in importance but 6 in performance would be labeled "par minus 1 performance." A policy area rated 7 in importance, but 8 in performance would be rated "par plus 1."

Using this scale, only one policy area was rated "par performance": historic preservation. Two policy areas, tourism and Internet access, were rated "par plus" because job performance ratings exceeded importance ratings. The remaining 13 policy areas were rated "par minus," ranging from par minus 1 to par minus 5. These include jobs and economic development, rated par minus 5; property taxes and health services, rated par minus 4; education, crime /public safety, and state taxes, rated par minus 3; zoning/ planning, environment, transportation, farm issues, farmland preservation and welfare rated par minus two; and parks and recreation rated par minus 1.



Support for Regional Cooperation

Rural Pennsylvanians seem split and undecided about the issue of regional cooperation, defined as "groups of local governments working together to provide services to residents."

Forty-nine percent of the survey respondents favor regional cooperation as "a way to cut costs and be more efficient." However, 30 percent of the respondents oppose regional cooperation on the grounds that it weakens local control. Between these two groups is roughly 20 percent of respondents who are undecided about the issue or don't know what they think. Easterners are somewhat more likely to favor regional cooperation as are upper income groups, but in general both support and opposition is broad based.

Controlling Sprawl

Rural Pennsylvanians strongly support local government action to control "sprawl," but support is not as strong for state government to take action against "sprawl." Sprawl was defined to respondents as "the problem of uncontrolled development without planning or other controls."

About 66 percent of respondents thought local government should take action to prevent sprawl, while about 21 percent thought local government should not interfere.

When state government was substituted for local government, the support for action dropped to 49 percent. Opposition to action against sprawl if state government is the actor increased to 34 percent.

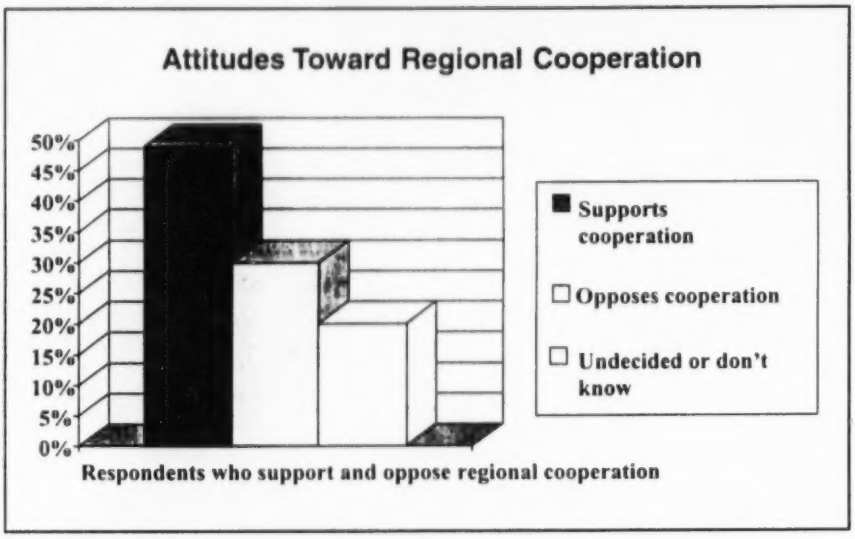
Other Survey Findings

• Rural Pennsylvanians reported that economic issues were important problems that face both state government and local communities, with 15 percent of respondents saying that unemployment was the most important problem facing them locally. At the same time, a clear majority of respondents think that things are going well in Pennsylvania, and seem optimistic that things will either stay the same or get better.

• Health services, jobs and economic opportunities, and education were most important to rural Pennsylvanians. It would seem that citizens believe that the money being spent in these policy areas is well spent, although they would like to see government do more (as measured by their response that government is

spending too little money in these areas).

• Almost 75 percent of respondents said that they did not plan to relocate in the next three years, although those citizens residing in western Pennsylvania were more likely than their eastern counterparts to say that their chances of relocating were good. One reason for relocating was career or job related, however noneconomic reasons were also expressed by many.



• A prime concern of respondents is in the area of job availability and economic development. When asked to identify the single most important problem faced by state government, 33 percent of respondents identified an economic issue. Jobs and economic development are rated extremely important. This concern is echoed in responses to other questions. Almost 35 percent of rural Pennsylvanians who said the chances of relocating in the next three years were good cited economic reasons.

• Although most working respondents feel their jobs are secure, they also feel that the available jobs are not "good" jobs.

• Rural Pennsylvanians seem inclined to support their local business community since they report doing most of their shopping locally, either with downtown merchants or with the local discount department store. A very small percentage of respondents reported shopping out of state, including through mail order catalogs or Internet sales.

• A clear majority of rural Pennsylvanians see their community as a good place to live and are not overly concerned about the safety of their community. Forty-one percent of respondents were active in their communities, with church-related activities reported most frequently. Community services most used by respondents relate to leisure activities, specifically recreation and library services.

• A clear majority of respondents paid either a lot of attention or a great deal of attention to local affairs. Further, rural Pennsylvanians tend to get most of their information about what is going on in their local community from their friends, followed closely by newspapers, radio, and television.

Topics Addressed in Attitudinal Survey

- Government Spending
- Population Stability and Out Migration
- Confidence and Trust in Governmental Institutions
- Use of Governmental Service in Rural PA
- Measuring State Government Performance on Policy Problems
- Insurance Held by Rural Pennsylvanians
- Support for Regional Cooperation
- Environmental Issues in Rural PA
- Support and Opposition to Action Against Sprawl
- Citizens' Broad Perceptions of State and Local Government
- Citizens' Broad Perceptions of Their Local Community
- Opinions and Attitudes About Health and Medical Services
- Shopping Habits
- Use of Computers and the Internet

• It is important to note also that when asked what type of services they would like to see available that are not currently being offered in their community, more than half had "no opinion." Twelve percent of respondents, however, did list "transportation services" as something they would like to see offered in their community.

• A majority of respondents reported being in excellent or good health and 75 percent of respondents reported that it was not difficult for them to get the medical services they needed in their areas. The problem with health care for rural Pennsylvanians – if they express difficulty – seems more related to expensive healthcare costs and lack of choices within their health care plans than to a lack of adequate health services altogether.

Methodology

Researchers used a random sample telephone survey of 844 rural Pennsylvanians who were 18 years old and older. The sample was randomly drawn from a series of telephone exchanges in 42 counties designated "rural" by the researchers. The calculated sampling error was ± 3 percent at the 95 percent confidence level.

The demographic profile of the survey respondents closely mirrors that of the rural population from which the sample was drawn. Males, however, were slightly underrepresented in the sample. For that reason, the data were weighted on the variable "gender" when examining the differences between demographic groups on several of the questions included in the survey.

This project was conducted by the Center for Survey Research and the Institute of State and Regional Affairs at the Pennsylvania State University's Capitol Campus, and sponsored by a grant from the Center for Rural Pennsylvania, a legislative agency of the Pennsylvania General Assembly.

The Center for Rural Pennsylvania is a bipartisan, bicameral legislative agency that serves as a resource for rural policy within the Pennsylvania General Assembly. It was created in 1987 under Act 16, the Rural Revitalization Act, to promote and sustain the vitality of Pennsylvania's rural and small communities.

For a copy of the complete report, contact the Center for Rural Pennsylvania at (717) 787-7555 or info@ruralpa.org.

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